

# Montgomery unveils Wheaton revitalization plan

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Planners envision more than 1 million square feet of condos, office space, hotels and government services as part of a major makeover of downtown Wheaton. (Samuel Corum/For The Examiner)

Montgomery County leaders are starting a new push to transform downtown Wheaton, riddled with strip malls, shuttered stores and an array of economic ventures that never materialized, into a polished, walkable urban center.

County Executive Ike Leggett Wednesday announced that local real estate company B.F. Saul will craft a mixed-use plan in coordination with private interests around the Wheaton Metro station and downtown hub, now lined primarily with small retailers and restaurants.

Planners envision more than 1 million square feet of condos, office space, hotels, and government services, in addition to a town center -- while increasing accessibility to the struggling Westfield-Wheaton Shopping Mall.

But advocates will need to sway investors, who have long cooled to the idea of setting up shop in Wheaton, in favor of nearby Bethesda and other more-established economic pockets.

"First, we have to stop the bleeding and keep people from leaving Wheaton," Leggett told *The Washington Examiner*. "In some places, we are going to have to start over to get a better mix of residential, retail and commercial properties. The perception is that Wheaton has some social and economic challenges that people don't want to be part of."

Thus far, county leaders have focused on luring big-box retailer Costco to the mall, saying it will bring stability to a retail pocket defined by economic volatility. To sweeten the deal, the county agreed to give the company \$4 million.

And one of the major hurdles to the project has disappeared, *The Examiner* has learned.

The retailer abandoned its push to circumvent the review process normally required for constructing a gas station in such an area, Leggett revealed. Originally, the store said it couldn't wait for the standard review -- which could take up to a year -- to build a gas station next to the store.

Some nearby residents and county planners have balked at the deal, arguing the large retailer will add urban sprawl rather than foster a walkable community.

"The mall in its current configuration has been a drag," Leggett said, defending the car-friendly project, which would be across the street from the Metro station. "As goes the mall, so goes Wheaton."

Developers say Silver Spring is the model for Wheaton's transformation, pointing to the arrival of Discovery Communications and the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center, among other major companies, after a series of failed revitalization attempts more than a decade ago.

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<http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/local/Montgomery-unveils-Wheaton-revitalization-plan-1004422-99493704.html#ixzz0wmdOO0iN>